Oliver Stone's film is criticized for taking aim without evidence

By Christopher Hanson
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WASHINGTON — In his new film "JFK," director Oliver Stone purports to enlighten us on two questions that have bedeviled the country for nearly 30 years: Who killed President Kennedy and why?

The film exonerates accused assailant Lee Harvey Oswald. It depicts a squad of shadowy hit men gunning down Kennedy in a coup d'etat at the behest of a cabal of arms makers, Pentagon brass and CIA operatives.

Their motive? To prevent peace from breaking out. According to the film, Kennedy intended to withdraw from Vietnam and to press for detente with Moscow. He was killed because the cabal had a big ideological-financial stake in continuing the Vietnam War and the Cold War.

Stone says "JFK" is "an emotional experience that speaks a higher truth," based on 25 years of research by sleuths like ex-New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison, the movie's hero (played by Kevin Costner).

It is a remarkable piece of filmmaking. Brilliantly interweaving actual news footage and re-enactments, presenting very complex material in a riveting way, giving short shrift to details that raise doubts about Garrison's case, "JFK" manipulates the emotions very effectively. Many are bound to leave the theater *feeling* that Stone's version is the true one.

The problem is with the facts, or lack of them. Critics say Stone has leaped recklessly beyond the evidence, relying on the wild speculation of sundry assassination buffs to depict rumor as reality.

They say "JFK" is just the latest example of a sort of mania that has flared up periodically in U.S. political life, a phenomenon historian Richard Hofstadter called "the paranoid style." Over the years, disaffected groups have, without proof, blamed the nation's ills on cabals of Masons, bankers, Jews, water fluoridationists, etc.

In much the same way, critics say, Stone is attributing the two biggest, most perplexing tragedies of the '60s — Kennedy's death and the Vietnam War — to yet another grand cabal, again without proof.

The film's Garrison character even suggests the 1968 murders of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were the result of the same sinister force that killed John Kennedy. Reasonable people can believe conspiracies exist, Hofstadter wrote, but what distinguishes the paranoid style is the perception of "a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as the motive force in historical events."

This is the kind of conspiracy the movie depicts.

In a commentary on "JFK," social critic Jefferson Morley wrote that the assassination, a persistent unsolved mystery, is like an enigmatic Rorschach ink blot into which Americans read their fears.

Enigmatic it is. What we really *know* about the killing is frustratingly skimpy: On Nov. 22, 1963, at 12:30 p.m., Kennedy's motorcade made a sharp left turn into Dealey Plaza, downtown Dallas. Suddenly, there were gunshots — witnesses disagree on how many. One took off the top of Kennedy's head.

Some witnesses were convinced shots came from a grassy knoll in front of Kennedy, others saw a rifleman at the window of the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald worked.

He was arrested that afternoon, accused of killing a policeman as well as Kennedy. Then, two days later, while in police custody, Oswald was murdered by nightclub owner Jack

See JFK, Page C6

10/9

3

JFK: Stone says criticism of his

From Page C1

Ruby.

The Warren Commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the crimes, concluded in 1964 that Oswald, an unstable leftist, had acted alone, as had Ruby. But in 1979 a special House committee concluded a conspiracy was likely and, in all probability, more than one gunman had shot at Kennedy. No researcher has been able to demonstrate who masterminded such a plot or for what reason.

HAROLD WEISBERG, 78, who has been researching the killing since 1963, says Stone's biggest mistake was to base his story on Garrison's book, "On the Trail of the Assassins" (1988), which asserts a government cabal killed Kennedy and then systematically covered up.

Weisberg, who once worked with Garrison but quit in frustration, says the book is a fraudulent apology for a botched investigation.

In 1969, Garrison put New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw, whom he alleged to be a CIA operative, on trial for conspiracy to murder Kennedy. Shaw was acquitted after the jury deliberated barely an hour, making Garrison a laughingstock.

Worse still, the DA was accused by NBC news of bribing and threatening witnesses.

Stone admits Garrison had faults, but defends using the Shaw trial in his film. He says CIA officials recently admitted Shaw had ties to the agency, and the House committee determined there had been an association "of an undetermined nature" between Oswald and Shaw.

Stone also alleges that news media — "paid-off journalist hacks," as he put it in USA Today — are in league with the government to perpetuate a conspiracy coverup by criticizing his film. "There's an agenda here," he told the Los Angeles Times. "They're the Establishment, Doberman pinschers trained to protect the government."

THIS COMMENT may suggest Stone is prone to see plots where others do not. As historian Hofstadter put it, central to this way of thinking is "the feeling of persecution" and a tendency to leap beyond the facts to assert the existence of a cabal.

In a 1951 speech, for instance, [illegible] Sen. Joseph McCarthy went through a litany of national ills, then leaped to this conclusion: "This must be the product of a great conspiracy." A Communist plot.

"JFK," although far from McCarthy in ideology, makes similar leaps in logic to embrace conspiratorial explanations. Three examples:

■ Lax security. Kennedy's security in Dallas was appalling. Buildings on the motorcade route were not checked for snipers. The Secret Service was not backed up by military security. JFK's guards reacted slowly to the shots. This much most people agree on.

But the film goes much farther. It leaps to the conclusion that, because government officials were responsible for JFK's security and failed to protect him, the government had to be in on the plot.

"Does that sound like a bunch of coincidences to you, Garrison?" asks the character "Mr. X" in one scene. "Mr. X" is a mysterious informant from military intelligence who confirms for Garrison that a government plot was indeed behind the crime.

Of course, a simpler explanation is incompetence or human error in JFK's security team. This was the House committee's conclusion.

■ "Coverup." Although Warren Commission members like Gerald Ford stand by their conclusions, many reputable analysts think the Warren Commission failed to conduct a thorough investigation. With a tight deadline and incomplete data, it rushed to a one-gunman judgment.

Just a day after Oswald was shot, Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach wrote in a memo: "The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates."

In the film, Stone leaps to the conclusion that, because the government was pushing the "lone nut" explanation, the government had to be part of the plot. Stone's research director, Jane Rusconi, wrote Weisberg: "A coverup is the third stage of a conspiracy — it has to follow the planning and the actual murder act."

BUT, AGAIN, there are alternative reasons why government might have leaped for the one-gunman idea: avoiding dangers, for instance, that would result if any Cuban or Russian involvement were exposed, or avoiding disclosures about CIA plots, dating from the Eisenhower era, to kill Fidel Castro with Mafia aid.

~~Sen. Harris Wofford, D-Pa., former aide to Robert Kennedy, thinks the government pushed a lone-gunman thesis to avoid disclosures about CIA plots, dating from the Eisenhower era, to kill Fidel Castro with Mafia assistance. Castro and the Mafia were suspects in the assassination.~~

■ Vietnam. The film accurately notes how Kennedy signed a memo, shortly before his death, ordering 1,000 U.S. advisers out of Vietnam, with the rest to follow by 1965. It depicts how, shortly after he died, Johnson intensified the war. Then comes the "leap": "Mr. X" tells Garrison that Kennedy was killed by the cabal to preserve the war and safeguard war profits: "Money was at stake, big money."

In fact, it is not clear Kennedy intended to withdraw from Vietnam. Some of his ex-aides are convinced he did. Other analysts like historian William Gibbons think Kennedy simply used the troop-withdrawal memo as a ploy to persuade South Vietnam to fight harder.

Of course, even if Kennedy did intend to withdraw, there is no proof he was killed for that reason.

In his own defense, Stone wrote a long letter to the Washington Post, responding to press criticism.

JFK:

PI

12/19/91

3 of 3

film is part of a coverup

"Profound doubts persist about how President Kennedy was killed and why," Stone said.

"Our movie is a metaphor for all those doubts, suspicions, and unanswered questions. . . . In the words of Jefferson, 'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.' "

The New York Times columnist Tom Wicker, who was in the Dallas motorcade, was unpersuaded: "The film (treats) matters that are wholly speculative as fact. I'm willing to believe . . . there was a conspiracy (but) only if someone presents an explanation . . . that's believable and reasonable — not paranoid and fantastic."

"JFK" may be manipulative, and it may distort reality. But, especially for those who admired Kennedy, its black-and-white explanation satisfies an emotional need.

Kennedy's death becomes more comprehensible and, in a sense, more acceptable if it is seen as the result of a powerful plot by dark forces to silence a good man.

"For a low-level nut (to have killed JFK) just seems so puny for the size of the action committed," said Rep. Al Swift, D-Wash. Swift still believes the Warren Commission but he says Stone's thesis is "more emotionally satisfying."